DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 401 502 CG 027 026

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TITLE Models of Adolescent Transition. ERIC Digest.
INSTITUTION Canadian Guidance and Counselling Foundation, Ottawa (Ontario).; ERIC Clearinghouse on Counseling and Student Services, Greensboro, NC.
SPONS AGENCY Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
REPORT NO EDO-CG-95-59
PUB DATE 95
CONTRACT RR93002004
NOTE 4p.
PUB TYPE Information Analyses - ERIC Clearinghouse Products (071)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adolescents; Career Awareness; *Career Counseling; *Career Development; Career Education; Career Guidance; *Careers; Foreign Countries; Individual Development; Post High School Guidance; *Prevocational Education; School Effectiveness; Secondary Education; Social Development; *Student Development; Vocational Interests
IDENTIFIERS Canada; Career Information; ERIC Digests

ABSTRACT

Rapid and escalating changes in labor market and post-secondary educational opportunities challenge adolescents to meet their personal and career needs. A recent study found that young people left high school unprepared for current career realities and that both the career and personal areas of the lives were in a state of change and uncertainty. Approximately 9 and 18 months following graduation, depression, self-esteem, and anxiety were correlated with a range of perceived problems. The study suggests a need for a broader view of career counseling; counseling which recognizes the developmental needs of young people, the influence of social and economic changes, and the importance of basing intervention strategies on personal and career competence. One way to address these concerns is the use of a competence model, which contains eight areas of competence: (1) purpose; (2) problem solving; (3) communication skills; (4) theoretical knowledge; (5) applied knowledge; (6) organizational adaptability; (7) human relations skills; and (8) self-confidence. Counselor strategies, such as developing multiple plans, can also help in youth development. Overall, career counseling needs to encompass a greater range of issues, should recognize that personal and career issues are intertwined, and encourage families and friends to form a strong base for support in transition periods. (RJM)

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CG027026

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ERIC DIGEST

1995 EDO-CG-95-59

Models of Adolescent Transition

William A. Borgen and Norman E. Amundson

Overview

Adolescents face a range of developmental issues. Havighurst (1952) suggested that two important areas included work and relationships. Levinson (1978) focused on changing relationships and on exploration, while Erikson (1968) commented on intimacy and commitment to goals. Super (1963) indicated that exploring and crystallizing vocational choice are important to older adolescents and young adults. What seems evident is that older adolescents and young adults enter transitions with the goal of becoming independently functioning adults, as they strive to meet evolving personal and career related needs. Rapid and escalating changes in labor market and post-secondary educational opportunities mean that adolescents now are confronted with the challenge of meeting their personal and career needs when neither can offer certainty or a sense of personal control.

Transition from High School

A longitudinal study by Amundson, Borgen, and Tench (in press) found that young people left high school unprepared for current career realities and that both the career and personal areas of their lives were in a state of change and uncertainty. At the end of their final year of high school, young people in the study expressed optimism about entering the career area of their choice and they expected to be successful workers in challenging jobs which offered personal satisfaction. About half the respondents indicated some concern about meeting post-secondary entrance standards. Approximately 9 and 18 months following graduation, depression, self-esteem, and anxiety were correlated with a range of perceived problems, including money, lack of support from family and friends, internal attribution of general transition problems, external attribution of career/employment difficulties, and lack of job satisfaction.

At the end of the study, some of the young people were interviewed. They were asked about factors that helped or hindered the post-high-school transition. Positive factors included supportive family and friends, making money, satisfying leisure activities, personal achievements, and educational success. Negative factors included relationship problems, career confusion, financial difficulties, unemployment, lack of satisfying work, lack of post-secondary educational opportunities, and difficulty in adjusting to post-secondary educational demands.

Developmentally, the young people were trying to meet personal and career-related needs, which were in a state of flux and uncertainty. It was apparent that a lack of progress in one area could have a negative influence on the other (e.g., an inability to gain post-secondary educational admission or paid work could drastically alter one's ability to move from being a dependent adolescent to an independent adult).

An Expanded View of Career Counseling Engendering Competence

The above study suggests a need for a broader view of career counseling; counseling which recognizes the developmental needs of young people, the influence of social and economic changes, and the importance of basing intervention strategies on personal and career competence, all within a context of diminished and changing opportunities for choice. In order to address this broader range of issues, we have employed a competence model with eight main areas (Amundson, Borgen & Tench, in press): purpose, problem solving, communication skills, theoretical knowledge, applied knowledge, organizational adaptability, human-relations skills, and self-confidence. We also have developed a number of counseling strategies that facilitate a smoother transition:

1. Developing Multiple Plans. Many young people leave high school with a narrow plan of action and with few alternatives. They fully expect to be successful with the plan and are not prepared to face any barriers. Developing flexibility in career planning requires a sense of purpose, problem solving skills, and several plans. Helpful strategies include visualization, lateral thinking, assessing options, and decision making in a context of uncertainty (Gelatt, 1989).

2. Self Advocacy and Marketing. As young people move towards further education, or into the labor market, it is critical for them to market and advocate for themselves. With scarce opportunities and confusing bureaucracies, there is a need to develop communication skills, self confidence, organizational adaptability, and effectiveness in human relations. This requires activities such as mentoring, role-played practice, and ongoing economic, emotional, and informational support.

3. Managing Changing Relationships. The emotional and social changes adolescents experience can challenge young people as they try to cope with barriers in the education system and labor market. Friends provide emotional support, but this is a time when friendship patterns are changing. Parents are needed for emotional, material, and information support, but, at the same time, they need to allow young people sufficient room to develop their own sense of identity. Coping with relationship issues can be facilitated through communication, human relationship training, and problem solving, which blurs most of the traditional distinction between career and personal counseling.

4. Meeting Basic Needs. Young people have a strong need for community. Other central needs include having a sense of meaning in life, physical and emotional security, and basic structure in relationships and living. As young people move beyond high school, many of these basic needs require revaluation. In addition to changing relationships, questions emerge as to how to make a living, how to plan meaningful activities, and how to effectively manage time. To facilitate these changes, young people need to establish a sense of purpose and understand how they are meeting their current and future needs. Counselors can help clarify these issues. Without this type of developmental assistance, young people often lack the resilience to maneuver within increasingly competitive educational and labor market environments.

5. Coping with Stress. Adolescence is a period of considerable stress. While much of the stress can by minimized through support, persistence, and active decision making and planning, there still will be times when young people find themselves in difficult situations. Coping with stress is associated with various competencies such as organizational adaptability, human relations, problem solving, and self confidence. Particular strategies for stress management include relaxation techniques, managing 'self talk,' focusing, and using support systems.

6. Coping with Loss. We were surprised at the extent to which young people were influenced by various personal losses. These losses involved death in the family (usually grandparents) and the experience of parental separation and divorce. The impact of these losses upon career events was considerable, suggesting a definite need for youth to develop competence in handling loss and grieving. Counseling in this domain blurs many of the traditional distinctions between the personal and career areas.

7. Bridging Programs. Many young people lack "hands-on" experience as they attempt to enter the world of work. Many also are unfamiliar with, and fearful of, moving into post-secondary education. To address this concern, counselors need to develop work experience and co-op education programs to help young people acquire the necessary experience. Post-secondary education entry programs can also play an important role in easing transition difficulties.

8. Information and Information Access. The challenge in the information age is not only how to gather information, but how to turn information into personally relevant knowledge. Young people need up-to-date information on careers, education programs, and market trends. They must also develop skills to assess the relevance of information. Acquiring these skills involves both theoretical and applied knowledge. Counseling strategies within this domain include helping young people develop research, interviewing, and critical analysis skills.

Conclusion

The breadth of the above components suggests the following:

1. Career counseling needs to encompass a greater range of issues.

2. Personal and career issues are inextricably intertwined for young people.

3. The ways in which young people make some of their transition experiences greatly influence their psychological well being.

4. Families and friends form a strong base for support in the transition period.

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